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ABSTRACT

Many studies have been done pertaining to the effects of parental divorce on children. Recently, studies have shown that parental marital status has an effect on adolescents' sexual activity. Specifically, children of divorced parents have been found to be younger at first coitus than children of married parents. This study attempted to replicate these findings, as well as investigate possible factors that might be associated with the earlier sexual activity of adolescents of divorced parents. Eighty- nine high school students from a small Eastern Pennsylvania school were administered a 38-question survey. The questions concerned each subject's parents' marital status and the subject's sexual activity. In addition, questions investigated the possibility that anger, lack of parental supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality are associated with the earlier sexuality of children of divorced parents. It was hypothesized that children of divorced parents would be sexually active earlier than children of married parents and that greater anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality would be associated with this earlier sexual activity. The results did not support the hypothesis. Children whose parents were separated or divorced were not found to be more likely to have had intercourse or show higher levels of overall sexual activity. Their age at first experience of intercourse was not significantly different from that of children whose parents' marriage was intact. The results of this study also failed to support the hypothesis that anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality are associated with earlier sexual activity of children with divorced parents. (Author/LLL)

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# Factors Influencing the Effects of Parental Marital Status on Adolescent Sexual Activity

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## Abstract

Many studies have been done pertaining to the effects of parental divorce on children. Recently, studies have shown that parental marital status has an effect on adolescents' sexual activity. Specifically, children of divorced parents have been found to be younger at first coitus than children of married parents. The present study attempted to replicate these findings, as well as investigate possible factors that might be associated with the earlier sexual activity of adolescents of divorced parents. Eighty-nine high school students from a small Eastern Pennsylvania school were used as subjects. Each subject was administered a thirty-eight question survey. The questions concerned each subject's parents' marital status and the subject's sexual activity. In addition, questions investigated the possibility that anger, lack of parental supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality are associated with the earlier sexual activity of children of divorced parents. It was hypothesized that children of divorced parents would be sexually active earlier than children of married parents and that greater anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality would be associated with this earlier sexual activity. The results did not support the hypothesis. Possible reasons for failing to replicate the findings of earlier studies are discussed.

Because divorce has become a common occurrence in today's society, a great deal of research has been dedicated to studying the effects of divorce on families, especially on children. In a three year longitudinal study, Parish and Wigle (1985) studied the impact of divorce on subjects' evaluations of their parents and themselves. Six hundred thirty-nine students from various Kansas school districts participated in the study. Each subject completed the Personal Attribute Inventory for Children using their mothers, fathers, and themselves as the target person. The inventory was completed twice, with a three year interval between administration dates. Thirty subjects were randomly chosen for each of three categories. The first group consisted of subjects whose families were intact at both data collection dates. The second group consisted of subjects whose families had been intact, but had experienced a divorce in the three year span of the study. The third group consisted of subjects whose parents were divorced and remained divorced throughout the course of the study. The subjects' evaluations of self, mother, and father were then analyzed using a repeated measures analysis. The results indicate that children from intact families evaluate themselves and their mothers and fathers more positively than children who had experienced parental divorce. The authors of this research refer to children of divorced parents as "troubled." Indeed, many other researchers have studied these "troubled" children.

A reasonable question that might be considered by social scientists in all fields is what are the specific factors that might further affect a child of divorce. Kaltar and Rembar (1981) considered how a child's age at the time of a divorce is significant. Using 144 outpatient evaluations of children seen for psychiatric evaluation in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan, they investigated the relationship between a child's age at the time of parental divorce and the degree of emotional disturbance observed, as well as the forms of emotional distress children develop. What Kaltar and Rembar found was that the amount of emotional disturbance was not correlated with the subjects' age at the time of the divorce. However, the types of problems manifested by subjects were significantly related to the age of the child at the time of parental divorce. Although relationships were found for children of all ages, significant for this study is the finding that inappropriate sexual behavior was most frequent in the adolescent female sample.

Yet another factor that could influence the "troubled" child of divorce is the experience of self-care. Self-care is the new term for unsupervised after-school practices (Merrow, 1985, p.8). The research on this topic has been divided. In a study by Rodman, Pratto, and Nelson (1985), forty-eight pairs of fourth and seventh grade students were compared on measures of self-esteem, locus of control, and teacher ratings of social adjustment and interpersonal relations. No statistically significant differences were found between matched samples of self-care and adult-care children. However, Steinberg (1986) reports significant differences on pressure to engage in antisocial activities such as stealing or cheating on an exam between self-care and adult-care children. This study used subjects in fifth through ninth grade.

Furthermore, it distinguished between different latchkey situations: children who were on their own and not at home, children hanging out after school, and children who returned to their own homes. The children who were on their own, but not at home were the most susceptible to peer pressure.

A child's parents' conflicts could also be a factor in how he or she is affected by divorce. In a study by Emery and O'Leary (1982), children's perceptions of marital discord were compared with behavior problems of boys and girls. This study was an attempt to gather additional evidence supporting the hypothesis that marital discord has a greater association with the psychological problems of boys than with those of girls and that marital discord appears to be most strongly related to conduct problems and delinquency. Twenty-five boys and twenty-five girls from a university clinic served as subjects. All the children lived in intact homes. Using questionnaires and surveys, the marital adjustment of all the subjects' mothers was evaluated. In addition, mothers were asked to complete a checklist for their child's deviant behavior. The children completed a questionnaire which measured their perceptions of their parents' marriage. Results did support the hypothesis. The findings suggested that marital discord has greater association with boys' behavior problems than with girls'. Furthermore, the findings indicated that marital discord is most highly correlated with conduct problems and delinquency.

In an additional study by Forehand et. al. (1988), ninety-six adolescent subjects were used to examine the relationships between parental marital status, parental conflict, and sex of the subject. Two significant findings were recorded. First, parental conflict was found to exert a significant effect on adolescent social adjustment and that divorce, in combination with high parental conflict, is especially detrimental. Secondly, Forehand et. al. found no sex differences in reactions to divorce and parental conflict.

Other studies related to divorce and parental conflict are discussed by Robert Emery in his 1982 literature review. For example, several studies are cited which identify conduct problems as the most prevalent behaviors of children of divorce (p. 315). Two studies cited by Emery address the sex differences issue. These studies propose that boys and girls of divorced parents have more behavioral problems when in the custody of the opposite-sex parent (p. 317).

After all the factors associated with divorce have been considered, the most common effects of divorce on children are emotional, psychological, and behavioral problems. Because of the great numbers of articles that have been published concerning these issues, well-documented literature reviews provide the most thorough introduction to the research. Arthur D. Sorosky, M.D. wrote "The Psychological Effects of Divorce on Adolescence" in 1977. This article considered the immediate and long range effects of divorce on children using the results of twenty-seven studies. Sorosky identifies grief associated with guilt, as well as shame coupled with resentment, as the initial responses to divorce. Behavior problems that are exhibited by children and adolescents

of divorce include a decline in academic performance, aggressive acting-out at home and school, and group delinquent behavior. Specifically addressing the coping strategies of adolescents, Sorosky identifies several conflicts faced by children of divorce. Aggression conflicts are characterized by an adolescent "acting-out." One suggestion is that parents are reluctant to discipline children after a divorce. Therefore, when a child does test limits and no consequences follow, the child feels insecure and continues to test his or her parents to find a source of punishment and retribution. A second suggestion is that adolescents are angry both at themselves for not being able to hold their parents together, and at their parents for the destruction of their family. This anger, then, is assumed to be the precursor to aggressive behavior. Sexual conflicts are another type of conflict faced by adolescents who have experienced their parents' divorce. Some research suggests that a father leaving a home can be viewed by an adolescent female as a sexual rejection. Furthermore, the adolescent male may be uncomfortable in his new role as "man in the family." Another possibility suggested is that parents encourage their children's sexually acting out because they use them as an unconscious extension of themselves. These children, specifically adolescent females, may continue this behavior as a search for their lost paternal contact through sexual relationships. Unfortunately, parents of these children have a difficult time setting limits for sexual behavior because they feel they are being hypocritical. Therefore, adolescent sexual behavior can be uncontrolled in circumstances of parental divorce. Identity conflicts, dependency-independency conflicts, social conflicts, and future conflicts are also described. Identity conflicts occur when the same-sex parent is not available to an adolescent. In this situation, the adolescent must find an alternate model to identify with or adopt the opposite sex parent as a substitute. Dependency-independency conflicts occur in a divorce situation because the adolescent is forced into separating himself or herself from at least one parent. Behavior problems related to this include distancing and withdrawal from the family, and a regression to immature levels of behavior. Social conflicts can be described best in the adolescents' dating activities. Because of a fear of being hurt or abandoned, some adolescents refuse to get involved with members of the opposite sex. However, other adolescents use dating relationships as a source of security in their unstable lives. This conflict, therefore, can lead to alienation or the opposite extreme, premature sexual activity. Future conflicts that must be faced include all aspects of how a child with divorced parents faces the future. Decisions about career choice, marriage, and children are all examples of future events in an adolescent's life that parental divorce can affect.

In a second, more recent literature review, Lawrence A. Kurdek (1981) summarizes additional findings on children's divorce adjustment. Dividing children of divorced parents into four age related categories, infants, preschoolers, school-age children, and adolescents, Kurdek outlines behavioral problems found to be associated with each age group. Infants are affected by the emotional state of their caregiver. Therefore, it is suggested

that hostility or depression of a divorced parent can interfere with an infant's maturation. Preschoolers often experience nightmares, depressed play, eating disturbances, bed wetting, problems with sexual identity, and guilt over having caused the departure of the noncustodial parent. School age children react to divorce and the loss of the noncustodial parent with depression, withdrawal, marked deterioration in school performance, and persistent requests for an explanation as to why the parental separation had to occur. And, according to Kurdek, the opinions about adolescents' adjustment to parental divorce are divided. Some view the adolescent as being minimally affected by the divorce because the adolescent can turn to sources outside of the home for comfort, advice, and nurturance. Others, however, see the adolescent as being maximally affected because of the likelihood of his or her having been exposed to longer periods of parental conflict. Such exposure has been linked to adolescents' problems with interpersonal relations, self-identity, and independence.

A factor that has been related to the behavioral problems of children and adolescents following a divorce is the amount of parental control the child is subject to. Dornbush et. al. (1985) have researched the ability of single-parent households versus two-parent households to control adolescents. Although Dornbush et. al. do not specifically address single-parent families as a result of divorce, most children of divorce do experience the single-parent situation at some point in their lives and are therefore affected by the issue of control. Dornbush et. al. hypothesized that single-parent households would be associated with earlier autonomy of adolescents. Furthermore, the earlier autonomy was expected to be associated with a higher probability of adolescent deviance. Subjects were drawn from a National Health Examination Survey. The sample consisted of 7,514 non-institutionalized adolescents, twelve to seventeen years old. Measures of deviance, including number of contacts with the law, whether adolescents had ever run away from home, smoking habits, truancy, and amount of school disciplinary action, were collected for each subject. The results indicated that, with no exceptions, the proportion of deviants among mother-only, single-parent households is greater than the proportion of deviants among households with two natural parents for all measures of deviance.

The long term problems of adults who experienced parental divorce have also been researched. In the Kulka and Weingarten (1979) study, data from two national surveys were used. In 1957, 2,460 respondents were included and in 1976, 2,264 additional adults became subjects. All subjects were at least twenty-one years old and lived in private residences. Data were gathered in structured interviews, in addition to the surveys. The results of the research provide support for the belief that parental divorce and separation may remain significant among adults. More specifically, Kulka and Weingarten found evidence that confirms that adults who have experienced parental divorce are more likely to report having felt an impending nervous breakdown. Further evidence suggests that adults from homes broken by divorce experience greater stress than others from intact families. Yet another difference between adult children of divorce and adult

children of intact families is that adult children of divorce were more likely to have sought professional help than a matched sample of adults from intact families.

In an additional study using adult subjects, Allen et. al. (1990) compared college freshmen from divorced and intact families on measures of separation from their families, self-esteem, and a cohesive self-picture. Fifty-four men and 106 women participated in the study. Thirty-eight participants reported being from divorced families. Each subject completed a pack of questionnaires which gathered information concerning personal data, his or her adjustment to college, personal attributional style, and the subject's family's adaptability and cohesion. The results of this research show that subjects with divorced parents are significantly more separated from their parents than subjects with intact families. However, both groups of subjects were equally adjusted to college life. Divorce was not a factor. The last finding of this survey is that subjects with divorced parents demonstrate a heightened sense of self-esteem, as indicated by the ability to take more responsibility for good events happening in their lives. There was no significant difference in cohesive self-picture between the two groups.

Although much of the general research on the effects of divorce have been discussed thus far, this paper is concerned with the specific effect of parental marital status on the age that adolescents first engage in sexual intercourse. Several studies have begun to consider issues specific to this topic. Research considering how females' trust in and willingness to rely on members of the opposite sex are affected by parental divorce has been done by Southworth and Schwarz (1987). The subjects used for this study were 104 female college students, fifty-two from divorced families and fifty-two from intact families. Each subject completed the Heterosexual Trust Scale, the Plan of Life Grid and the Schwartz-Zuroff Love Inconsistency Scale, in addition to providing information concerning their post-divorce contact with their father. The five measures that were used to assess the women's trust in the opposite sex were plans to cohabit before marriage, planned full-time work years, heterosexual trust, plans to marry, and planned age of marriage. Significant differences were found between women from intact families and women from divorced families on the first three measures. Women from divorced families had greater expectancies to cohabit before marriage, planned on working a greater number of years, and had less heterosexual trust than women from intact families. The Heterosexual trust of women of divorced families is not discussed in relation to heterosexual behavior in this study.

A study by Hetherington (1972) considers the effects of an absent father on the development of adolescent daughters. Seventy-two lower and lower middle class, firstborn, adolescent, white girls served as subjects. The girls were divided into three equal groups by their family structure. One group came from intact families. A second group came from families in which the father was absent due to divorce. The third group came from families in which the father was absent due to death. The study consisted of five measures: observational measures of behavior, measures of

non-verbal behavior with a male or female interviewer, an interview with the daughter, an interview with the mother, and scores on personality, control, and anxiety scales. Results indicated that daughters of divorcees sought more attention from male adults and initiated more proximity seeking and physical contact with male peers than did the other girls. With male interviewers, subjects from divorced families showed more forward lean, more arm and leg openness, and more eye contact than any other group of subjects. The authors suggest that the effects of father absence on daughters, as a result of divorce, appears during adolescence as an inability to act appropriately with males.

Raymond Montemayor (1984) discusses the impact of divorce on adolescent heterosexual behavior. In his literature review, he cites findings that girls from divorced families exhibited sexually precocious behavior and were more interested in and receptive toward males than girls from intact families. Furthermore, these girls began to date earlier and to be sexually active earlier than girls with nondivorced parents.

Research supporting the hypothesis that parental marital status effects adolescent sexual behavior is relatively recent. However, studies have found that adolescents from divorced families do engage in sexual intercourse earlier than adolescents from intact families. Newcomer and Udry (1987) researched the parental marital status effects on adolescent sexual behavior. Specifically, they addressed four questions concerning the relationship. First, they investigated if living in a single parent family or if the transition to a single parent family precipitates earlier sexual activity of adolescents. Second, Newcomer and Udry questioned the general effects on a child's behavior of his or her parents' marital status. For example, is being a child of divorce also a factor in other age-graded minor delinquencies? Third, they considered the influence of the sex of the child. And fourth, the authors questioned the possibility of preexisting normative differences in the family which predispose marital disruption and early adolescent sexual activity. Originally, 1,405 junior high school students were used as subjects. The majority of students ranged from age twelve to age fifteen. All subjects were caucasian. Interviews were conducted with each subject in their own home to gather demographic information. Then, subjects were given a survey to complete in private. Two years later, eighty-two percent of the original sample was reinterviewed. Participants were not included in the study if they were not virgins at the time of the first interview. Furthermore, adolescents from families with stepmothers, single fathers, foster parents, grandparents only, and emancipated minors were not included. The results generated indicate that boys who were initially in a two-parent family, but changed to a single-parent family during the two year span of the study were significantly more likely to become sexually active. Therefore, the authors concluded that the disruption of a two-parent family is a factor influencing the sexual behavior of boys. Girls, however, were more likely to become sexually active living in stable, single-parent households. In addition, early sexual activity was found to be related to other age-graded delinquencies

such as smoking, cheating on a test, and drinking alcoholic beverages. No preexisting differences in the subjects' families were associated with sexual activity of adolescents.

In a related study, Kinnaird and Gerrard (1986) investigated the premarital sexual behavior of women as a function of their mothers' marital status. Initially, 875 females from an introductory psychology course completed a questionnaire on their family background. From this sample, thirty subjects were randomly selected from each of three groups: subjects from intact families, subjects from divorced families in which the subjects had lived with their mother in a single-parent household, and subjects from divorced families in which their mother had remarried. To be included, subjects in the divorced group must have experienced the divorce within the three years prior to the study. Subjects in the remarried group were those whose mothers had remarried within the last two years. Excluded from the study were all participants who had been married themselves, had a child, had been adopted, had unmarried parents, had lived with someone other than their mother after the divorce, had experienced multiple divorces of their mother, or had experienced the death of either parent or stepfather. At the first data collection date, subjects completed five questionnaires including the Family Atmosphere Questionnaire (Form A), the Dating and Sexual Activity Questionnaire, the Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale, the Attitudes Toward Divorce Scale, and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire. At the subjects' second meeting with experimenters, they were interviewed and administered the Family Atmosphere Questionnaire (Form B). Each questionnaire collected different information relevant to the study. The two forms of the Family Atmosphere Questionnaire solicit the subjects' perceptions of family unity, security, general happiness, and the amount of conflict in their families when they were children (Form A) and currently (Form B). The Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale is a fourteen item measure of how subjects perceive marriage. The Dating and Sexual Activity Questionnaire obtains information about current dating status, dating history, and sexual activity. The Attitudes Toward Divorce Scale requires subjects to rate their agreement with favorable and unfavorable statements about divorce. Results indicated that daughters from divorced and reconstituted families reported more sexual experience than those from intact families. In addition, subjects from divorced families indicated they first had sexual intercourse significantly earlier than subjects from intact and reconstructed families. The ratings of family atmosphere of women from intact, reconstituted, and divorced families were found to be significantly different. Subjects from intact families reported significantly greater harmony than subjects from the divorced and reconstituted groups, as well as less family conflict.

In the present study, the experimenters attempted to replicate previous findings that parental marital status has an effect on adolescent sexual activity. Parental divorce was expected to be associated with earlier sexual activity of children of divorced parents. In addition, anger, lack of parental supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality were investigated as possible mediating factors related to the earlier sexual activity of

adolescents of divorced parents.

## Method

### Subjects

Eighty-nine high school students from a small Eastern Pennsylvania town were randomly selected to serve as subjects. Thirty male and fifty-nine female students participated in the study. The mean age of the students was 17.01, with a range from sixteen to nineteen years of age.

### Apparatus

A thirty-eight question item paper and pencil self-report questionnaire (see Appendix A) was distributed to each participant. A standard cover sheet was attached to each survey explaining the purpose of the survey and encouraging students to answer the questions honestly.

The survey consisted of questions directed at the subjects' parents' marital status, their own sexual activity, and their perception of their family atmosphere. In addition, twelve 5-point Likert scale items developed by the authors for this study addressed the hypothesis that anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality are positively associated with earlier sexual activity of children of divorced parents.

The questions relating to dating and sexual activity were taken from The Dating and Sexual Activity Questionnaire used by Kinnaird (1986) and developed by Pinney (1983). These questions gathered information about the subjects' current dating status,. dating history, and sexual activity. The Family Atmosphere Questionnaire, created by Landis (1960), was also used by Kinnaird (1986). Using two forms of the questionnaire, the subjects' perceptions of their family unity, security, general happiness, and conflict were obtained, for the time period before and after the age of thirteen.

Standard business envelopes were provided to all subjects. After completing the anonymous survey, subjects folded it and sealed it in the envelope, in order to assure confidentiality.

### Procedure

Questionnaires that were designed for use in this study were initially given to a pilot sample of seven subjects. The subjects completed the survey and were then asked to critique it. They were asked if the questions were understandable, if there were any questions they did not want to answer, or if there were any other comments that they wanted to offer.

The final version of the questionnaire was distributed to subjects, along with the cover sheet and envelope, by a teacher at the high school. The experimenter was not present. The subjects were instructed to treat the survey as they would a test, covering their responses and not looking at anyone else's paper. Questions directed at the teacher were answered without elaboration. As subjects finished, they placed the survey into the envelope, sealed it, and gave it to the teacher.

## Results

Scores for a composite measure of sexual activity were calculated for each subject by totalling three relevant directionally adjusted items (see Appendix B). Scores on the measures of anger toward parents, lack of parental supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality were calculated for each participant by adding the relevant directionally adjusted items (see Appendix C). High subscale scores reflect anger, lack of parental supervision and high perceived parental endorsement of sexuality. For the entire sample, none of these scales were significantly correlated with age at first intercourse [anger toward parents, r=.21; lack of parental supervision, r=-.07; parental endorsement of sexuality, r=.23] nor with intercourse experience [anger toward parents, r=.11; lack of parental supervision, r=.23; parental endorsement of sexuality, r=-.25] They were also unrelated to scores on the composite measure of sexual activity [anger, r=.19; lack of supervision, r=.09; parental endorsement of sexuality, r=.12]

Participants were divided into two parental marital status groups by combining those whose parents were either divorced or separated into one nonmarried group (n=21), leaving a second group with married parents (n=65). This was done to accommodate for the small number of subjects from divorced families (n=18). Oneway analyses of variance (ANOVA) on age at first intercourse and on intercourse experience failed to show significant effects for parental marital status. Nor was parental marital status associated with significant differences in age when subjects first started dating, in whether or not subjects were currently sexually active, in the amount of fighting subjects do with their parents, with whether or not subjects perceive their parents as believing premarital sex is O.K., with whether subjects believe their parents would approve of their sexual activities, in the amount of time subjects spend alone, nor on the limits parents put on subjects' dating activity.

A oneway ANOVA did reveal a significant difference on the anger subscale between children of married parents and children whose parents were not married [$F=4.790$, $p<.03$]. Children from families with divorced or separated parents indicated a higher degree of anger [$x=15.47$, $s.d.=2.37$] than children with married parents [$x=10.16$, $s.d.=2.26$]. However, this was not associated with earlier sexual activity in those in the divorce group. No significant differences were found on the parental supervision subscale nor on the parental endorsement subscale.

An unexpected significant marital status effect emerged when subjects who had not had sexual intercourse from both groups rated the importance of the fear of getting a venereal disease as a reason for not having sexual intercourse [$F=7.569$, $p<.01$]. Subjects with nonmarried parents reported less worry about getting a venereal disease [$x=1.67$, $s.d.=1.03$] than children of married parents [$x=3.24$, $s.d.=1.30$].

In addition, a significant difference was found between the parental marital status groups with respect to subjects' belief that they had been cheated out of a normal family life [$F=6.444$,

p<.01]. Children of unmarried parents reported feeling more cheated [x=3.84, s.d.=1.21] than children of married parents [x=4.54, s.d.=1.00].

Parental marital status was associated with significant differences in subjects' perception of the quality of their family atmosphere. (See Table 1 for group means and standard deviations.) Parental marital status was found to be significantly associated with the subjects' perception of family unity, both before [F=16.11, p<.0001] and after [F=5.746, p<.02] the age of thirteen, the subjects perception of security before thirteen years of age [F=8.519, p<.005], the subjects' perception of his or her parents' relationship before [F=29.46, p<.0001] and after [F=14.47, p<.001] the age of thirteen and the subjects' relationship with his or her parents before the age of thirteen [F=6.817, p<.01]. Specifically, children with divorced parents described their families as having less family unity [x=3.000, s.d.=1.26] than children with married parents [x=1.91, s.d.=1.02]. They felt less secure [x=2.48, s.d.=1.17], believed their parents to have more open conflicts [x=3.6, s.d.=1.57], and described their own relationship with their parents as more conflicting [x=2.75, s.d.=1.33] than children of married parents.

A significant sex difference in reported sexual refraining was found when male and female subjects were compared [F=5.04, p<.03]. Female subjects (n=53) indicated that they were less likely to engage in sexual activity because they knew it would upset their parents (x=4.89, s.d.=0.32) than male subjects (n=33, x=4.55, s.d.=1.03). In addition, a oneway ANOVA of the subjects' sex by their parents' marital status showed that female subjects were significantly more likely to be from a divorced family than male subjects [F=3.634, p<.03]. No other sex differences were found to be significant.

In this sample there were no significant sex differences in sexual intercourse experience (55% females have; 71% males have) or age at first intercourse (males, n=18, x=15.33, s.d.=1.28; females, n=40, x=15.78, s.d.=1.03). However, ANOVA revealed a significant sex difference in reported current sexual intercourse experience [F=5.38, p<.05] with females scoring higher (x=1.72, s.d.=0.45) than males (x=1.42, s.d.=0.51). A majority (73%) of females sampled reported current sexual involvement, including intercourse, whereas only 42% of the males reported this. An ANOCOVA using sex as subject as a covariate showed no significant parental marital status effect for reported current sexual intercourse nor on experience of sexual intercourse or age of first intercourse.



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## Discussion

The results generated by this survey failed to replicate the findings of previous studies, (Kinnaird and Gerrard, 1986; Newcomer and Udry, 1987) showing a relationship between adolescent sexual activity and parental divorce. Children whose parents were separated or divorced were not found to be more likely to have had intercourse nor show higher levels of overall sexual activity on the composite measure. Their age at first experience of intercourse was not significantly different from that of children whose parents' marriage was intact. Although prior research has found evidence that parental marital status does affect the age that adolescents first engage in sexual intercourse (Newcomer and Udry, 1987) this study found no significant difference between children of married parents and children of divorced or separated parents on any of the sexual experience variables considered. There may be several reasons for the discrepancy between the findings of the present and previous studies.

Sampling differences across studies may have contributed to inconsistent results. The subjects for this study may not be representative of the entire population. Subjects were taken from a small school district comprised of rural, suburban, and small town residents. The community has a primarily German origin and very few ethnic groups are represented. These factors may have possibly biased the data. Adolescent females from black and ethnic backgrounds have been found to engage in sexual intercourse earlier than white adolescent females (Wyatt, 1989). Due to an underrepresentative sampling of black and ethnic adolescents in the study, it is possible that the results failed to reflect the experience of all adolescents. However, it would also be interesting to see if the earlier sexual intercourse of black or other ethnic females is associated with a higher divorce rate within this subgroup.

Using subjects from a small school in which it is probable that students know one another may also have influenced subjects' responses. The information for this study was gathered through self-report using surveys. The decision to engage in sexual intercourse prior to marriage is strongly is influenced by peer, parental, and social factors. Adolescents are under a great deal of pressure to be accepted, and are conscious of the social consequences of sexual promiscuity. Therefore, the social desirability of having sex before marriage may influence self-report data. This may be especially true for students who are asked to complete a paper and pencil questionnaire because information is recorded on paper and there is a greater possibility that someone may see their responses. Furthermore, it is possible that the norm operating in the high school for which subjects were drawn in this study were dissimilar to those of schools used in previous studies.

An additional limitation of this sample of adolescents was the socioeconomic status of the subjects and their parents. Subjects were from primarily middle to upper-middle class families; adolescents from poor, lower class families were underrepresented. Therefore, the effects of economic hardship commonly associated

with children with divorced parents were not factors that influenced subjects in this study. As a consequence, the divorce group used here may have been atypical.

Unlike the Kinnaird (1986) research, this study was done using both male and female subjects. Including male subjects may have influenced the data in two ways. First, Newcomer and Udry (1987) found that only the disruption of a two parent household predicts earlier sexual activity for boys. This study did not distinguish male subjects with recently divorced or separated parents from male subjects who had experienced longterm disruption of their family. Therefore, the results may not accurately represent the effects of parental marital status on this sample, because male subjects were included in the study regardless of their age when parents divorced or separated. Secondly, adolescent male subjects are influenced considerably by peer pressure. If sexual prowess is believed to be important for male identification or if a subject's friends socially reinforce reports of sexual intercourse, male subjects may have indicated that they had had sexual intercourse, when in fact they were virgins. This may have contributed to a ceiling effect for males, which could obscure a parental marital status effect.

Another compelling explanation for the failure to replicate the findings of previous studies that have not used a mixed sex sample, involves sex inequalities across parental marital status groups in this study. In the present investigation, the sample in the parental divorce group was disproportionately female. If the females in the sample became sexually active later than the males, this unanticipated sex confound could account for the present study's failure to replicate the earlier finding of later sexual involvement in children with married parents. However, here females were actually found to report greater current (within the past month) intercourse experience, and no sex differences emerged on the measure of age of first intercourse or history of intercourse experience. The finding of greater current intercourse experience of females is probably due to their greater involvement with older sexual partners, because femlaes tend to date older males.

The sexual composition of the present study's sample may actually be fairly representative, since other research has shown that parental divorce is inversely related to the number of sons in a family. Therefore, in most samples of children with divorced parents, males should be somewhat underrepresented. Future studies in this area should evaluate the sex composition of the married and divorced groups, and may need to plan for additional sample size to allow for use of covariate statistical procedures.

The results of this study also failed to support the hypothesis that anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality are associated with earlier sexual activity of children with divorced parents. Obviously, since no sexual activity difference was observed, there was no opportunity to assess the validity of these mediators. Also, this may have been due in part to the fact that this survey did not control for the amount of time that had elapsed since the divorce or the length of the subjects' parents separation, nor did it control for

subjects whose biological parents are divorced, but live happily in a family with stepparents. Future studies taking these factors into account may find that anger, lack of parental supervision and parental endorsement of sexuality may be mediating variables, assuming they find the previously observed sexual activity difference.

The length of time following a divorce could also influence how subjects perceive their parents' attitude toward sexuality and whether it influences their own sexual decision making. If a subject's parents have just recently divorced or separated and a parent immediately becomes involved with someone else, a subject may perceive this as parental endorsement of promiscuous behavior. However, if after a longer period of time the subject's parent is still in the same relationship, the subjects' perception of his or her parent's beliefs about sexuality may change.

The effects of the length of parental separation would be similar. However, the length of parental separation could also influence the lack of supervision variable. Subjects whose parents have recently separated would not necessarily describe themselves as unsupervised because until recently both parents were active in their home environment. However, subjects whose parents have been separated for a longer time would possibly be more likely to describe themselves as less supervised because only one parent has been watching their actions and behavior.

Subjects whose parents are divorced but live happily in a family with a step-parent would not necessarily feel anger towards their biological parents, have a lack of supervision, or perceive their parents as endorsing sexual activity. Therefore, subjects in this category would not show that any of these variables are associated with earlier sexual activity because they are not influenced by these factors.

Although not associated with earlier sexual intercourse, children with nonmarried parents did indicate a significantly greater amount of anger towards their parents than children with married parents. The greater anger of children with nonmarried parents may be related to subjects' dissatisfaction with their family. Although parental marital status was not a significant factor when subjects' ratings of the general happiness in their family was compared, subjects with nonmarried parents did consider themselves to be cheated out of a normal family life significantly more than subjects with married parents. This perception of being cheated out of a normal family life could be related to the greater anger of children with divorced or separated parents. If these subjects blamed their parents for their atypical, abnormal life, then a feeling anger, resentment and rebellion could realistically follow. The subjects who indicated a greater amount of anger could also be reacting to their parents' unhappiness. A single parent raising a child is not uncommon in today's society. However, there are financial tensions, as well as increased responsibilities that accompany a single parent role. Parents may become overburdened and stressed in their role as both mother and father. Discussing their concerns with their children may alleviate the weight of their responsibilities, but it may also negatively affect the children. Adolescents who are unprepared to handle adult dilemmas

may react with anger because they are being too involved in what they perceive as their parents' problems. Parents who have remarried could also be a source of anger, especially if the subject does not like the stepparent, or believes that his or her biological parent is not happy in the new relationship. Furthermore, results of this study indicate that parental marital status has a significant effect on subjects' perception of their relationship with their parents before age thirteen. Subjects from families with nonmarried parents described their relationship with their parents as more conflictual than subjects from families with married parents. However, no significant difference was found between subjects with nonmarried parents and subjects with married parents after the age of thirteen. Since the youngest subject in this study was sixteen, the results indicate that the amount of current conflict between subjects and their parents is not apparently seen as an important factor influencing the greater amount of anger of subjects with nonmarried parents.

A significant difference was found when the importance of the fear of getting a venereal disease was compared between subjects with married parents who had not had sexual intercourse and subjects with unmarried parents who had not had sexual intercourse. Although many different reasons for not having sex were offered in the survey, the fear of getting a venereal disease was the only reason significantly different for the two groups of subjects. Subjects from families with married parents were more concerned than subjects from families with unmarried parents. This difference may be related to the importance subjects' parents place on the issue. If a subject's parents are concerned about venereal disease, then it may be that the subject will also be more concerned. Therefore, this finding may be attributed to the fact that married parents are more concerned about the issue of venereal disease or have greater opportunity to convey these concerns.

Parental endorsement of sexuality was not related to adolescent sexual activity. Perhaps while sanctioning sexual expression increases activity in some children, it reduces rebellious sexual acting out, and therefore has no net effect on activity.

The results of this study revealed that subjects' sex was significantly correlated with engaging in sexual activity to purposely upset one's parents. Female subjects were significantly less likely to engage in sexual activity for this reason than male subjects. Two possible reasons for this difference can be explored. First, the subjects in this study were adolescents. By engaging in sexual activity to purposely hurt one's parents, subjects would be consciously be using sex as a "weapon." Although many adolescents could not be considered naive about sex or sexual intercourse, few would probably be bold enough to exploit themselves to upset their parents. Secondly, adolescent male subjects were less likely to engage in sexual activity to upset their parents. Although stereotypical, parents of adolescent boys may be much less concerned if their sons are sexually active than if their daughters are. Therefore, if parents would not be upset by their son's sexual activity, it would be impossible for a young man to use sex as an agent to hurt or upset them.

Future research in this area of study is important. Divorce has become a very common occurrence in our society. More studies need to done to clarify the results of this and previous research. Using a larger sample of subjects, more representative of the entire population, would allow results to be generalized for a greater number of adolescents. The effects of single parent families and families with stepparents on the sexual activity of adolescents must also be investigated. Although this study found no association between anger, lack of supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality and earlier sexual activity, further research should be done to investigate these possibilities.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Measures

| Dependent Measures | Married (n=65) x(s.d.) | Divorce (n=21) x(s.d.) |
|---|---|---|
| anger | 9.84 (2.26) | 8.53 (2.37) |
| lack of parental supervision | 6.84 (2.61) | 6.68 (3.35) |
| parental endorsement of sexuality | 14.02 (3.48) | 14.17 (4.30) |
| age of first intercourse | 15.55 (1.24) | 15.73 (0.80) |
| intercourse experience | 1.38 (0.49) | 1.29 (0.46) |
| composite sexual activity | 17.88 (1.34) | 18.13 (0.83) |
| age started dating | 14.52 (1.13) | 14.90 (1.00) |
| currently sexually active | 1.33 (0.47) | 1.44 (0.51) |
| amount of fighting with parents | 3.71 (1.14) | 4.00 (1.20) |
| parents believe sex is O.K. | 3.58 (1.32) | 3.33 (1.24) |
| parents approve of sex activities | 3.39 (1.43) | 3.37 (1.57) |
| time spent alone | 3.15 (1.47) | 2.89 (1.73) |
| limits on dating activities | 4.12 (0.89) | 4.11 (1.24) |
| worry about venereal disease | 3.24 (1.30) | 1.67 (1.03) |
| feal cheated of normal life | 4.54 (1.00) | 3.84 (1.21) |
| family unity before age 13 | 1.91 (1.02) | 3.00 (1.26) |
| family unity after age 13 | 2.45 (1.13) | 3.14 (1.24) |
| parents' relationship before 13 | 2.09 (0.89) | 3.60 (1.57) |
| parents' relationship after 13 | 2.37 (1.10) | 3.50 (1.36) |
| security before age 13 | 1.75 (0.93) | 2.48 (1.17) |
| relationship with parents before 13 | 2.08 (0.89) | 2.75 (1.33) |

Appendix A

1. Sex ___ male ___ female

2. Age ____ years

3. My parents marital status is best described as

___ married
___ divorced
___ separated
___ widowed
___ other

4. If your parents are separated or divorced, how old were you when that happened?

____ years

5. I live with

___ both parents ___ my mother ___ my father ___ other

6. During most of my childhood, I lived with

___ both parents ___ my mother ___ my father ___ other

7. My father is
___ single
___ remarried
___ remarried with stepchildren
___ other

8. My mother is
___ single
___ remarried
___ remarried with stepchildren
___ other

9. Approximate age when you first started dating: ____ years

10. What is your current dating status? (check one)
___ not dating
___ dating more than one person
___ steady relationship with one person
___ engaged but not living together
___ living together

11. How long have you been involved in the relationship that you checked above?

____ months

12. Have you ever had sexual intercourse? ___ Yes ___No

(If you checked "No" skip ahead to #15)

13. Approximate age when you first had intercourse: ____years

14. Are you currently sexually active (have you had sex within the last month?)

___ Yes ___ No

15. If you have <u>not</u> had intercourse, please <u>circle</u> the appropriate rating for each of the following reasons:

- I do not feel ready to have intercourse.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- My partner does not want to have intercourse.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- It is against my religious beliefs.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I'm afraid of my parent's disapproval.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I'm afraid of the possibility of pregnancy.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I'm afraid of getting a venereal disease.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I believe that intercourse before marriage is wrong.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I'm afraid of damaging my reputation.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

- I have not met a person with whom I have wanted to have intercourse.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Does not apply to me at all. | | | | Applies to me a great deal. |

16. What is your sexual orientation?

___ heterosexual ___ bisexual ___ homosexual

17. Because of my parent's marital status, I feel cheated out of a normal family life.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

18. I never fight, argue or get angry with my parent(s).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

19. There have been instances where I have engaged in sexual activities because I knew it would upset my parents.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

20. I do things specifically because my parents tell me not to.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

21. My parents speak openly and honestly about sex with me.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

22. I think my parents believe premarital sex is O.K.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

23. If they were aware of my sexual experiences, my parents would approve.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

24. My parents confide in me about their past and present sexual experiences.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

25. I am often home alone in my house after school and in the evenings.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

26. My parents insist on knowing about my relationships with my friends.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

27. My parents put limits on my dating activities.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

28. My parents always meet my dates.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | | | | Strongly Disagree |

For the next five questions, please describe your family <u>before you were thirteen years old</u> on the following dimensions by circling the appropriate rating.

1. Sense of family unity:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| We had a closely united family. | | | | We had no family unity. |

2. Sense of security:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I felt very secure. | | | | I felt very insecure. |

3. General happiness or unhappiness:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| We had a very happy family. | | | | We had a very unhappy family. |

4. Relationship between parents:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| My mother and father no areas of conflict that I was aware of. | | | | My mother and father had were in constant open conflict. |

5. Relationship between my parents and me:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| My parents and I had no areas of conflict that I was aware of. | | | | My parents and I were in constant open conflict. |

For the next five questions, please describe your family since you were thirteen years old on the following dimensions by circling the appropriate rating.

1. Sense of family unity:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| We have a closely united family. | | | | We have no family unity. |

2. Sense of security:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I feel very secure. | | | | I feel very insecure. |

3. General happiness or unhappiness:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| We have a very happy family. | | | | We have a very unhappy family. |

4. Relationship between parents:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| My mother and father have no areas of conflict that I am aware of. | | | | My mother and father are in constant open conflict. |

5. Relationship between my parents and me:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| My parents and I have no areas of conflict that I am aware of. | | | | My parents and I are in constant open conflict. |

# Appendix B

## Composite Sexual Activity Scale Items

12
14
13

## Appendix C

Scoring items for anger, lack of parental supervision, and parental endorsement of sexuality subscales.

### anger subscale items

17
* 18
19
20

### supervision subscale items

* 25
26
27
28

### parental endorsement subscale items

21
22
23
24

* item value reversed in scoring